

Pioneer relations with Indians on trek were mostly peaceful

By Michael Perkins
Deseret News staff writer

Mormon pioneers enjoyed good relations with Indian tribes during the migration to Utah in the mid-nineteenth century, although some fighting did take place along the trail, historian Stanley B. Kimball told a gathering of Sons of the Utah Pioneers Wednesday night.

Most encounters between pioneers and Indians were peaceful, some were benevolent, and some were even humorous, said Kimball, a history professor at Southern Illinois University and an expert on Mormon trails used during the westward migration.

The Indians regularly offered to trade their ponies to the Mormon men for their white women. Kimball said redheaded women wearing their hair in ringlets were especially attractive to the Indians because they liked to pull the ringlets and see them spring back into place.

One redheaded teenager had to hide beneath feather beds while a particularly persistent Indian chief searched all the wagons in the train to find her. After her mother told the chief she was lost, he left promising to find her and return her. He never came back.

Kimball said some of the Mormon men foolishly kidded the Indians that they could have the Mormon women in exchange for a pony. When the braves returned with a horse to trade for a wife, the men were forced to extract themselves from a deal the Indians had taken very seriously.

Frequently the Indians also promised to buy the children of the woman they wanted to acquire in trade. Kimball said the Indians considered it the proper and humanitarian thing to do.

Although the Indians expressed a definite interest in the white women, there was only one verified case where a Mormon woman was kidnapped and never returned by

Indians during the westward migration.

Despite the generally peaceful relations with the Indians, the pioneers remained on guard whenever an Indian came around their camps. Kimball told of one time when the Mormons suspected a certain brave of spying. They dusted a freckle-faced boy with flour to make him look like a corpse that had died from smallpox. They laid him between two white sheets and when the Indian saw him he ran away, Kimball said.

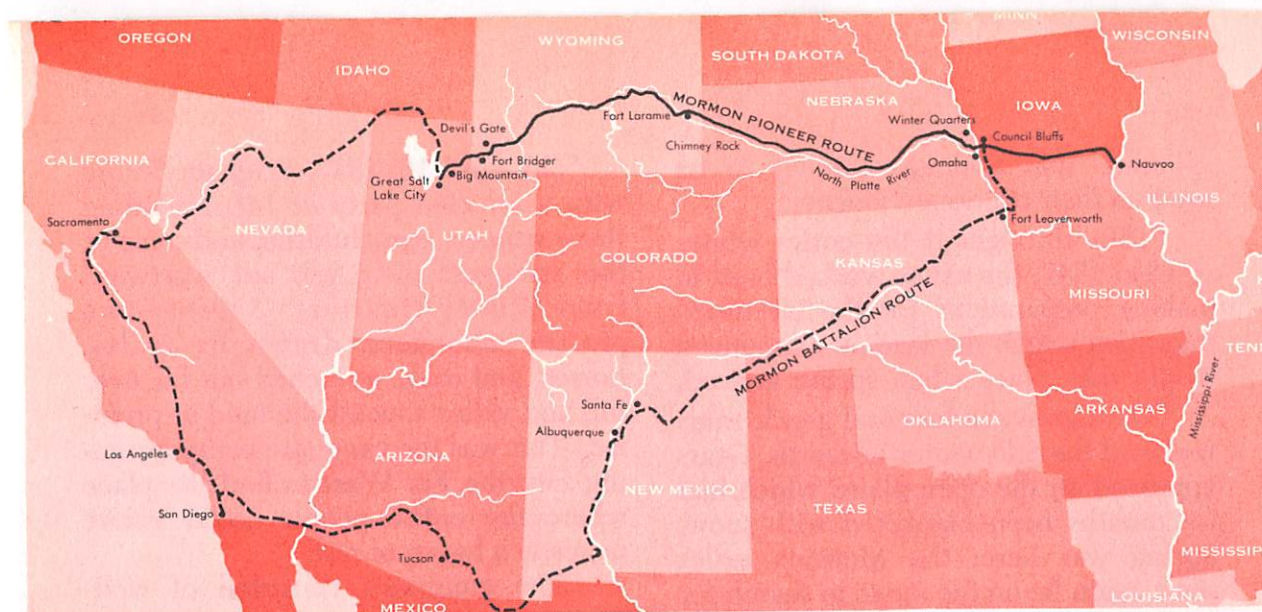
Kimball said the Indians occasionally took care of lost Mormon pioneers who were separated from their companies. On the trails west of the Missouri River, the Indians frequently helped pioneers push their handcarts.

Kimball told a story about a 73-year-old woman who became separated from her handcart company. After she wandered into an Indian encampment, the Indians fed her, helped her ford a river with her handcart and put her

on the right trail heading west. She was later reunited with her company after traveling alone for three days, Kimball said.

Indian violence against pioneers broke out in the early 1860s when the U.S. government's Indian troops were called back to fight in the Civil War. Kimball said the native Americans struck back to reclaim their land, which pioneers had begun to occupy instead of just travel across. Despite Hollywood myths, though, he said few immigrants were actually killed while crossing the plains. An average of 18 whites were killed a year by Indians between 1840 and 1860, and tales of massacres were mostly rumors.

Contrary to Mormon folklore, Mormon pioneers did not blaze trails across the Great Plains, Kimball said. They were too concerned with making their difficult job as easy as possible to worry about earning a place in history books by cutting new trails to the West, he said.



The Mormon trek

Map — courtesy Wheelwright Lithographing Co.

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